PATRIOT'S DREAM
July 4, 2004

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Psalm 30
Mark 12:13–17
Acts 4:1–7, 13–22, 5:27–29

"We must obey God rather than any human authority."
Acts 5:29 (NRSV)

"We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."
The Declaration of Independence

"America is more than a place to hang your hat.
It represents a value system most of us believe in very strongly.
That value system has to do with the worth of human beings,
wherever they are. We believe that lives are worth saving."
John Danforth, Episcopal clergy and former U. S. Senator

We thank you today, O God, for our nation:
for the freedom to gather here in security and comfort.
We thank you for our church
and its deep involvement in the history of our nation.
Startle us, again, with your truth
and open our hearts to your word:
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A good way to celebrate the Fourth of July is by reading the Declaration Thomas Jefferson wrote and Benjamin Franklin edited 228 years ago. It is an amazing document. It announces to the world that the thirteen British Colonies in the New World are now independent, and it eloquently expresses the reasons why.

And it is signed by the delegates elected by the thirteen colonial assemblies and sent to Philadelphia to meet as a Continental Congress. John Adams is there in his neat, legible hand; John Hancock signed boldly, of course; Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, the Presbyterian physician, are there. And if you look carefully in the next-to-last column, about two-thirds of the way down, you will see the signature of John Witherspoon. I like Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams, but my very favorite is Witherspoon. He was a Presbyterian minister, the president of the College of New Jersey, which became Princeton University, originally a thoroughly Presbyterian institution.

He was the only clergy to sign the Declaration, and when he did, he said something about it being better to sign that glorious document and be hanged as a traitor than to die of old age.

And so, from Witherspoon to the present, Presbyterians have been part of the American experiment, and more importantly, precisely because of our theology, we have always regarded involvement in the body politic as a sacred duty.

I was at Princeton Theological Seminary for several days last week, in the middle of the Richmond meeting of our General Assembly, to preach four nights at the Summer Institute of Theology and lead a workshop for young preachers. It was stimulating and hazardous: preaching to other preachers is always a precarious exercise, made even more precarious because among the attendees were forty Church of Scotland ministers, all of whom seemed to know Calum MacLeod and all of whom kept making bad jokes about visiting their lost colonies and the Church of Scotland in the colonies—meaning us, of course.

On Tuesday as I was thinking about preaching a sermon on the Fourth of July, I took a walk. About a mile outside Princeton there is a large open field, the Princeton Battlefield. There are no rusty artillery pieces or stacks of cannon balls. Just a beautiful green, open space dotted with a few oak trees, surrounded by the New Jersey woods. I read each of the markers and traced the movements of the Colonial and British troops. I walked around the Thomas Clarke farmhouse, in which Colonial General Hugh Mercer died, attended by both British and American physicians. And I walked to the brow of the hill at the field’s western perimeter where there is a monument. It reads

> This is hallowed ground. Across these fields in the early light of January 3, 1777, George Washington's Continentals defeated British Regulars for the first time in the long struggle for American Independence.

Nearby, the young men who died that winter morning are buried: twenty-one British soldiers, fifteen American, side by side.

I stood there for a long time. There was no one else around. I thought about how precious freedom is, how costly the continued existence of this—or any—nation is, and how every generation pays for it: thirty-six deaths on one cold morning in 1777. I thought about all those who have died in our 228-year history. And, of course, I thought about the more than 800 young Americans who have died in Iraq and continue to serve in harm's way.

Whether or not you agree with this or any of the wars we have fought, some of which were necessary and some not, freedom and our continued existence as a nation are precious, paid for by self-sacrifice and the laying down of life, mostly young people.

Even when we don't agree with our nation's policies and participation in a particular war, we owe those brave young Americans our support and gratitude and prayers. I'm grateful for my country.

I love the Fourth of July—everything about it: picnics, parades, baseball, fireworks on the lakefront carefully synchronized with the 1812 Overture, about which Peter Gomes quipped that it is peculiar that we would chose to celebrate our independence listening to an overture written to celebrate the victory of the Russians over the French, our allies who, a few decades earlier, helped us defeat the British. It must be that we just like a lot of noise, Gomes concludes.

I'm grateful for my country, particularly when I do not agree with its policies and practices, because the freedom to disagree and dissent, the responsibility to disagree and dissent and to participate in the national conversation, is close to what the American experiment was all about.

“There are three kinds of patriots,” William Sloane Coffin once said. “Two bad and one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. The good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with the world.”

Patriotism here is not so much about the land as it is about ideas. Of course, we love the land, from sea to shining sea. But we do not call it the “Fatherland” or “Mother Russia.” Patriotism here is about concepts, ideas, and values.

In a chapter on patriotism in his book *Credo,* William Sloane Coffin writes, “How do you love America? Don’t say ‘My country, right or wrong.’ That’s like saying ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober’; it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag and don’t burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean.

“How do you love America?—with the vision and compassion of Christ, with a transcendent ethic that alone can fill the ‘patriot’s dream’—that sees beyond the years, her alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears” (p.83).

How to love America?—with something of the love of Christ is an answer we might consider.

Some want to make it into Christian America, a nation specifically and intentionally Christian. The Christian Right continues to lobby and work with considerable success these days and a direct line to the White House. State-sponsored prayers in schools, state-supported evangelical teaching about human sexuality, limiting choice on the critical issues around reproductive rights, withdrawal of support to international agencies working on population control—the agenda of the Religious Right is in the news every day and plays an increasingly important role in shaping our nation’s policies.

Walter Cronkite, speaking on behalf of the Interfaith Alliance, an organization founded to give voice to a more moderate religious posture, said, “As a concerned person of faith, I have watched with increasing alarm as the Christian Coalition and other Religious Right groups manipulate religion to further their intolerant political agenda.”

Cronkite cites three high profile examples:

Jerry Falwell—about the September 11 attacks, a statement for which he apologized—said, on Pat Robertson's 700 Club: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actually trying to make that an alternative life style . . . I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'"

And Pat Robertson:

"The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, antifamily political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."

And Randall Terry:

"Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism."

"Do they speak for you?" Walter Cronkite asked. Not for me. Not for most of you, I'll wager. So it's time to speak for ourselves.

What's wrong with trying to be a Christian nation? In a new book, *"Who Are We?"* Harvard professor Samuel Huntington argues forcefully that we were and still are a Christian nation. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 16 about the recent Supreme Court decision not to remove "Under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance, Huntington asserts that not only do 92 percent of Americans believe in God, but the vast majority are Christian. We should be tolerant of other religions, he argues, but we should claim our Christian identity and stop arguing about it.

Huntington makes a strong argument. But the fact remains that the people who declared their independence in 1776 and thirteen years later nailed it down in a constitution could have created a Christian nation and didn't. They, or their families, were all Christians. Some were not very orthodox and didn't go to church. But the vast majority did. They had come from Christian nations in Europe, nations where the state supported and sponsored religion and the church supported the state, and they wanted none of it. It was Thomas Jefferson who

came up with the idea that there would be no “state church” in the new nation. He called it his “fair experiment,” and nobody thought it would work. Jefferson wanted a religiously neutral state and an atmosphere of religious liberty in which citizens are free to choose and practice their religion or to abstain, an atmosphere in which churches are free to sink or swim on their own without state support or interference, an atmosphere—and here’s the critical point—in which the state will be careful not to enforce anyone’s religious position on the rest of the people.

Nobody thought it would work. Nobody had ever tried it before. Everybody in history simply assumed that a nation-state needed religious underpinning and religion required state sponsorship. As it has turned out, nobody has ever done anything more helpful and powerful for the cause of religion and the cause of freedom than create a nation with religious liberty at its very heart.

God knows, we have had enough of nation-states reflecting one religion, quite enough of the Taliban and the Mullahs formulating policies. The last thing the world needs is another intentionally one-religion nation, even a Christian one.

What is worth loving are the ideas, the bold concepts, the values.

In a fine essay, “Renewing the American Experiment,” David Korten writes

> America’s founding fathers gathered in Philadelphia in 1776 to issue an audacious declaration that raised the human species to a new understanding of its possibilities and changed the course of history . . . an experiment dedicated to the possibilities of a society governed by ordinary citizens that gives full expression to the ideals of liberty, justice, and opportunity for all.

Think of it: when they brashly declared that all men are created equal and that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed, they were contradicting at least 5,000 years of human experience and history. Equality, consent of the governed—those were radical, new, fragile, powerful ideas.

Think of how that fragile, new concept of liberty has evolved and grown. It was launched in 1776 by a group of white men, most of whom owned slaves; the Constitution was ratified in 1789, the Bill of Rights added in 1791, and the project didn't get around to abolishing slavery until 1865. In 1870, nearly a century after the founding, the Fifteenth Amendment declared that no person could be denied the right to vote on the basis of color or race. Women were not added to the list until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, nearly 150 years after Independence. (See Korten)

Think about a system that created an independent judiciary, a Supreme Court whose very purpose is to preserve and protect liberty, often times from the government itself. Think about the brilliance of a system in which the court can tell the president, as it did last week, that he cannot ignore the laws and values of this country, even in the case of suspected combatants incarcerated in military prison.

Perhaps the best part of the whole experiment is the new idea of the dignity and autonomy and worth of the individual. Jonathan Sacks, Britain's Chief Rabbi, says that the most important and far-reaching idea in all of history is that all people are created equal, that all human beings have the same intrinsic worth and that all deserve respect, dignity, and freedom. That comes from the Bible, the first page, in the stunning assertion that human beings are created with the image of God in them.

That's an idea worth living for and dying for. David Korten and other critics of our policy and behavior in Iraq and the Middle East wonder whether our best values can still inspire us, and I, for one, want to say yes. And at the heart of those values is the notion of the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of the human conscience.

It's there in the Bible, on the first page and in the first chapters of the history of the church. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostles remained in Jerusalem and, after the experience of Pentecost, began to preach and teach about Jesus to the consternation of the authorities, religious and civil. Peter and John are hauled into court, interrogated and ordered to stop preaching and teaching. They respond to the court, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than God, you must judge." They are dismissed and threatened, and, of course, they go right back out into the streets and start

preaching and teaching, disobeying the authorities. After a while, they are arrested and hauled into court again, questioned and reminded that they were ordered to cease and desist and had deliberately disobeyed; whereupon they respond, unforgettably, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

There goes the one thing every tyranny must have: namely the unquestioned loyalty and obedience of its subjects. There goes the authority of every dictator from the Emperor to the Führer to Saddam Hussein. There goes the rationale for abuse, cruelty and torture—“I was only following orders”—from Dachau to Abu Ghraib.

And here comes the best idea in all of human history: that human beings have worth and dignity, that human conscience is sacred, and that no one, no state, has the right to violate or coerce it.

That’s an idea worth living for, worth speaking and acting for.

It is a sacred duty to speak and act, to love our country with our eyes wide open. In a sermon on patriotism, Peter Gomes said, “I love my country too much to see it complicit in its own worst stereotype—bullying, alienating allies, dismissing the U.N., making up rules as it goes.” That was a year ago. May the events of this past week mark a new beginning, and, pray God, a new American posture in the family of nations, leader by example, leader not just by military power but by the truth and goodness of its own values.

When Jesus was asked one day about the relationship between politics and religion—God and the state—he answered memorably, but ambiguously. “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Render to God what is God’s.” But he didn’t draw the line between the two. In fact, to conclude from his words that the two realms, Caesar’s and God’s, are separate is a mistake. God is sovereign overall. To God alone we give our ultimate devotion and loyalty. And the deliberate ambiguity is, I think, for the purpose of making us responsible for our personal faith and for the society, the politics, in which we live.

I am in a small group of Christians and Jews who meet regularly to talk about Israel and Palestine and American political involvement in these issues: academics, ministers, rabbis, business people. It’s a small group, and we meet every other month or so for breakfast and a

vigorous conversation, to say the least. We have very different opinions. So I have some new and valued friends, one of whom is Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, Judaic Scholar at the Jewish Federation. Yehiel's grandparents were refugees from Russia who came to this country after the Bolshevik Revolution and continuing persecution of Jews. He and I had lunch, and we were talking about politics. Later he wrote a wonderful note that is a good way to end a Fourth of July sermon.

Yehiel told me he had decided to sit out the 1968 election because he was so dissatisfied with both presidential candidates. His grandmother heard about it and telephoned him in rabbinical school and said in her impeccable and beautiful Yiddish, "Your grandfather and I suffered under the Czars, and then we suffered under Lenin and Stalin. We never had the right to vote, and you're going to now sit out an election and not vote?"

"Well, you can be sure, John, that I made it to the polls. Indeed, my grandparents who did not come to this country until the 1920s and 30s would dress up in their Sabbath best to go to the polls. They were always the first ones there, early in the morning. So this is a remarkable place. None of our people have ever lived in a place like this in the past 2000 years."

How do you love America?

With eyes wide open.
With an informed mind.
With a holy impatience that wants this nation always to be as good as its own best values.
With the courage to care and discuss and participate and vote.
With the vision and compassion of Christ, and the patriot's dream that sees beyond the years, her alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.

Amen.